

AlUla, October 3, 2025

Press release

**Villa Hegra opens its doors in AlUla, Saudi Arabia,  
and launches its 2025-2026 cultural programming**

**Born from the friendship between Saudi Arabia and France, Villa Hegra, the first bilateral institution dedicated to cross-cultural cooperation and contemporary creation, opens its doors in the heart of AlUla.**

After two years of off-site cultural programming, the institution was officially inaugurated on October 2, 2025, in the presence of H.H. Prince Badr bin Farhan Al Saud, Minister of Culture, Governor of the Royal Commission for AlUla, and Chairman of the Villa Hegra Foundation, representatives of the French and Saudi governments, and prominent figures from the cultural, artistic, academic and economic spheres.

A new landmark in AlUla's cultural landscape, established through the 2021 intergovernmental agreement between Saudi Arabia and France, Villa Hegra symbolizes the shared ambition of both countries.

Its two founding entities, the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) and the French Agency for the Development of AlUla (Afalula), aim to position this region of northwestern Saudi Arabia as an internationally recognized cultural and tourist destination.

Dedicated to contemporary creation, particularly in the fields of visual arts, design, cinema, and performing arts, Villa Hegra offers a space open to creativity, education, and research, promoting exchanges between the AlUla community and international audiences.

Resulting from the renovation of two existing buildings, its site, located in the heart of AlUla, features an exhibition hall, artist studios, educational spaces, AlUla's first studio dedicated to the performing arts, as well as an auditorium housing the region's first indoor cinema.

Its 2025-2026 cultural season, under the artistic direction of the Franco-Saudi duo Gaël Charbau and Basmah Felemban, will feature several highlights:

- **artist residencies** inviting, among others, French designer Paul Emilieu Marchesseau, French sculptor and stage director Théo Mercier, and Saudi artist Badr Ali;
- **partnerships** with renowned institutions such as Manufactures nationales – Sèvres & Mobilier national, Philharmonie de Paris, Chaillot - Théâtre national de la Danse, and Musée Rodin;
- **masterclasses** for young local talent, notably with French cellist Gautier Capuçon;
- **educational workshops** designed to encourage young audiences to experiment with various forms of expression;
- **events, performances, and exhibitions**, including original works by Jean-Michel Othoniel and Rachid Ouramdane;
- **research projects in social sciences**, in partnership with the CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research);
- **academic exchange programs** in architecture, in partnership with the École nationale d'architecture Paris-Malaquais – PSL and the RCU;
- **innovation**, through a unique collaboration with AR Studio Paris by Snapchat Inc, and its artist residency dedicated to augmented reality glasses, aiming to explore the intersections between art and new technologies.

On October 21, Villa Hegra will join *Viva Villa!*, the international network of cultural Villas, alongside Villa Medici (Rome), Casa de Velázquez (Madrid), Villa Kujoyama (Kyoto), and Villa Albertine (United States). Joining this prestigious network will strengthen ties with member institutions, generating new opportunities for artistic exchange and collaboration.

The opening of the institution coincides with the first meeting of its board of directors, chaired by H.H. Prince Badr bin Farhan Al Saud, Minister of Culture and Governor of the RCU.

According to Ferial Fodil, CEO of Villa Hegra: “The opening of Villa Hegra, which will join the global network of cultural Villas, represents a pivotal milestone for this unique bilateral institution. It embodies France's cultural dynamism in Saudi Arabia and, in return, that of the Kingdom in France. Its new site will serve as a hub for its artistic and cultural programming, offering a space for creation, collaboration, and transmission to local and international artists and audiences alike. It embodies the institution's profound ambition: to awaken artistic sensibilities, reveal talents, and nurture vocations, inspiring generations of artists, cultural enthusiasts, and curious minds.”

### **About Villa Hegra**

Born of an intergovernmental agreement signed in 2021 between Saudi Arabia and France, Villa Hegra is the first bilateral institution dedicated to cross-cultural cooperation and contemporary creation. This unique venue, the first of its kind in the Arabian Peninsula, aspires to become a pillar of creative dialogue, bringing together the best of Saudi and French cultures of today and tomorrow in one place.

As a member of the international network of cultural Villas (Villa Medici, Casa de Velázquez, Villa Kujoyama, Villa Albertine), Villa Hegra strives to strengthen the relationship of sharing and mutual enrichment between the two nations. It is a platform dedicated to exploring and promoting new artistic and creative horizons, in the heart of AIUla.

A cornerstone of the *Journey Through Time* regional Masterplan, and more broadly of the *Vision 2030* strategic vision, it aligns with the strategic priorities of the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU) and the French Agency for the Development of AIUla (Afalula).

Through its off-site preopening phase launched in 2023, Villa Hegra has embedded itself in the local and international cultural ecosystem by launching a series of creation and research programs in AIUla and Paris. Its site, inaugurated in October 2025, will host its artistic programming, offering a space for meetings and exchanges.

### **About the French Agency for the Development of AIUla**

The French Agency for AIUla Development (Afalula) was established to support its Saudi partner, the Royal Commission for AIUla, in the transformation of the AIUla region into a worldwide cultural and touristic destination. Born from an intergovernmental agreement signed by Saudi Arabia and France in April 2018, Afalula opened its Paris office in July 2018.

The Agency is organized around specialized centers of expertise, namely: architecture, development, culture and heritage, archaeology, tourism and hospitality, human capital, environment and infrastructures, perfumes and botany, agriculture, equestrian and security.

Afalula has been establishing several partnerships with French and international experts, companies and operators, which include representatives from both the academic and architecture realms.

Under the terms of the intergovernmental agreement of December 4, 2021, the Agency is responsible, on behalf of the French Government, for the Villa Hegra's cultural, educational, and artistic program.

### **About the Royal Commission for AIUla**

The Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) was established by Royal Decree in July 2017 to preserve and develop AlUla, a region of outstanding natural and cultural significance in north-west Saudi Arabia.

Its long-term development plan encompasses a broad range of initiatives across archaeology, tourism, culture, education, and the arts, reflecting a commitment to meeting the economic diversification, local community empowerment, and heritage preservation priorities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's *Vision 2030* program.

It is founded on a sustainable approach that aims to preserve the natural and historical heritage of the region while positioning AlUla as an attractive place to live, work, and visit.